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The Growth of National Learning Assessments in the World, 1995-2006

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The Growth of National Learning Assessments in the World, 1995-2006

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Abstract

This study examines the main characteristics of national learning assessments, which have been conducted with increasing frequency worldwide since the mid-1990s. It describes the subject areas and grade levels that have been assessed, and how these have changed over time and varied across regions. In addition, it provides examples of the results from national learning assessments and points out how these can be used to evaluate changes in learning outcomes over time and to compare the extent of country-level disparities in student achievement. The paper calls on international agencies to work with national stakeholders to further support, improve and utilize national learning assessments in the future.

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1. Improving the quality of education: International perspectives

Countries and international organizations have long committed themselves to universalising primary education. However, not until the Jomtien Declaration (1990), and then the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), was the issue of *quality of education* recognised as a crucial component in the broad movement of achieving Education for All. At Dakar international stakeholders committed themselves to providing free and compulsory primary education of *good quality* (the second of the 6 EFA goals). They also pledged to *improve all aspects of educational quality so that 'recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills'* (the sixth goal).

In addition, the *Expanded Commentary on the Dakar Framework of Action* (2000:15-17) stressed that “quality is at the heart of education, and what takes place in classrooms and other learning environments is fundamentally important to the future well-being of children, young people and adults.” Access to quality basic education is a fundamental right: “No one should be denied the opportunity to complete good quality primary education because it is unaffordable....”

The *Commentary* further stressed that “improving and sustaining the quality of basic education is equally important [to universal primary education] in ensuring effective learning outcomes....” Specifically, this meant ensuring well-trained teachers and active learning techniques; adequate facilities and instructional materials; clearly defined, well-taught and accurately assessed curricular knowledge and skills; and a healthy, safe, gender-sensitive environment that makes full use of local language proficiencies.

The increasing importance of quality issues in education, especially among international agencies committed to Education for All, has focused considerable attention on the issue of learning outcomes. What skills and competencies should students leave school with? How should the outputs of a national education system be measured and assessed? To what extent do assessed learning outcomes reflect the stated goals and objectives of national education systems? This paper presents new information on the nature of national learning assessments, and highlights their worldwide growth since the mid-1990s. It discusses how these assessment tools can be better used by policymakers and international stakeholders to monitor educational quality.

2. Learning outcomes, enabling conditions and the quality of education

The notion of quality in education is notoriously elusive, with different definitions and approaches put forward by different scholars, institutes and international organizations. Building upon a distinction discussed in the 2005 GMR, *The Quality Imperative*, two major approaches can be noted.

- 1) *An emphasis on learning outcomes.* Many policy makers, scholars and organizations view educational quality primarily--if not exclusively--in terms of specific, pre-defined learning outcomes and pupil performance in relation to these outcomes. A focus on learning achieved by students supports their cognitive development--a major objective of educational systems. Monitoring educational quality, according to this approach, involves assessing what and how much students are taught, how much they learn and the conditions that best facilitate effective learning outcomes. It typically focuses on the results of tested curricular knowledge or basic skills and competences. In some cases particular behaviours, attitudes or values are also assessed.

- 2) *An emphasis on life-enhancing educational experiences.* A second approach contends that the perceptions, needs and experiences of those actually involved in the learning process effectively determine its quality. The focus here is on issues such as the extent to which schools and educational programmes meet the social, creative and psychological needs of learners, or whether educational activities contribute to shared community values among learners. This approach, which is especially relevant for adults and education in non-formal settings, reflects a broader understanding of the educational experience itself--albeit a more difficult one to monitor.

The GMR has followed, by and large, the first approach because of its mandate to monitor quality in diverse education systems based, when possible, on comparable evidence. Thus, it has focused on the results of international¹ and regional² assessments of learning outcomes, primarily in the areas of literacy/language, mathematics and science. In addition, the GMR has examined important 'enabling conditions' for learning such as yearly instructional time, an adequate physical infrastructure (e.g., desks, chairs, latrines) and sufficient learning materials (eg, textbooks, notebooks) as well as the supply and quality of the teaching workforce.³ In principle, the monitoring of learning outcomes and enabling conditions can provide a fairly comprehensive picture of quality in national education systems. However, due to the limited data availability on many of these dimensions, proxy indicators of educational quality (e.g., the survival rate to grade 5 or the primary completion rate) have often become the basis for evaluating substantive national progress (or the lack thereof).

Comparative assessments of student learning employ standardized tests developed according to internationally defined criteria or expectations. They can be useful for comparing student achievement levels across regions and countries and for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of an education system. Since the 1960s such assessments have been carried out with greater frequency and with substantial mass media coverage (Keeves 1995; Degenhart 1990; Postlewaite 2004). They have often become a basis for (calls for) educational reform.

Nevertheless, it is worth recalling that results from comparative studies of student achievement are incomplete indications of what, and how much, students actually learn in school. They tend to focus on certain curricular areas (e.g., language and mathematics) and not others (history, geography, arts, foreign language, moral education), even though the latter encompass important aims of education. They focus on student knowledge within well-defined domains, and rarely examine broader issues related to student values, attitudes and other non-cognitive skills.

¹ In the past decade, major comparative studies in reading (PIRLS), mathematics and science (TIMSS), civic education (Civic Education Study) and pre-primary education (the Pre-Primary Project) have been conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). In addition, there have been three rounds of the OECD-sponsored Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The former concentrate on the monitoring of curricular provisions and subject-specific achievements of students according to grade or age; the latter on the cross-cutting skills and competences of 15-year-old students in three literacy domains: reading, mathematics, and science. These assessments have mainly been carried out in high-income countries and a growing number of middle- and low-income countries.

² Examples of regional assessments include the Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of Quality in Education (LLECE), the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) and the 'Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN' (PASEC).

³ Educational expenditures, another important enabling condition, were also highlighted.

3. National learning assessments

National learning assessments evaluate learning outcomes based on criteria and expectations set forth by *national* education authorities. National assessments (sometimes called system assessment, learning assessment, and assessment of learning outcomes) may be defined ‘as an exercise designed to describe the level of achievements, not of individual students, but of a whole education system, or a clearly defined part of it (e.g. fourth grade pupils or 11-year olds).’⁴ They are intended to provide national policymakers with systematic information about the status of students’ learning outcomes and the extent to which students attain pre-defined standards or proficiencies. As we show below, they are typically subject-oriented and organized around the intended curriculum of a particular grade level: in other words, they ask how much children have learned of what they should have been taught in a subject. As such, national assessments have limited apparent use for comparing learning outcomes across systems or countries. Nevertheless, they can provide a valuable tool for monitoring learning outcomes, identifying areas in the system in need of policy attention and holding education stakeholders accountable. Furthermore, if national learning assessments become part of a broad framework of monitoring and evaluation, their mere existence represents an indicator of the quality of the system.

In the following sections we survey national learning assessments which have been carried out in eight world regions⁵ since the mid-1990s. We briefly analyse overtime trends in national assessments and their emphases. In addition to providing clear-cut evidence of the growing importance of national learning assessments, we note several emerging trends and exceptional patterns. Finally we illustrate how national learning assessments can be used as a basis for comparing changes in educational quality across systems and countries.

4. Methodology

This paper builds on a previous study prepared by Marta Encinas-Martin (2006) for the 2007 GMR, which provided a preliminary overview of international, regional and national assessment activities. With respect to mapping national assessment activities, the initial effort focused on four world regions--Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean--and sought answers to the following questions: In which countries, world regions and years were national assessments most prevalent? Which agencies/institutes carried out the national assessments? Which student populations and subject areas were typically assessed?

The current study draws upon the earlier mapping of national learning assessments, seeking to validate and extend, whenever possible, the previously compiled information. It further analyses major trends in national assessments, and their characteristics, over time and across regions. To assure continuity between the two studies, the same definitions and format of the table are used.⁶

⁴ *Using Assessment to Improve the Quality of Education*, UNESCO: IIEP, Paris 2001 www.unesco.org/iiep

⁵ Arab States, Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and Western Europe, South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

⁶ The complete listing of national learning assessments is found in UNESCO (2007) *EFA Global Monitoring Report, Education for All by 2015: Will we Make It?* Paris: UNESCO and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 208-220. It can also be downloaded at www.efareport.unesco.org.

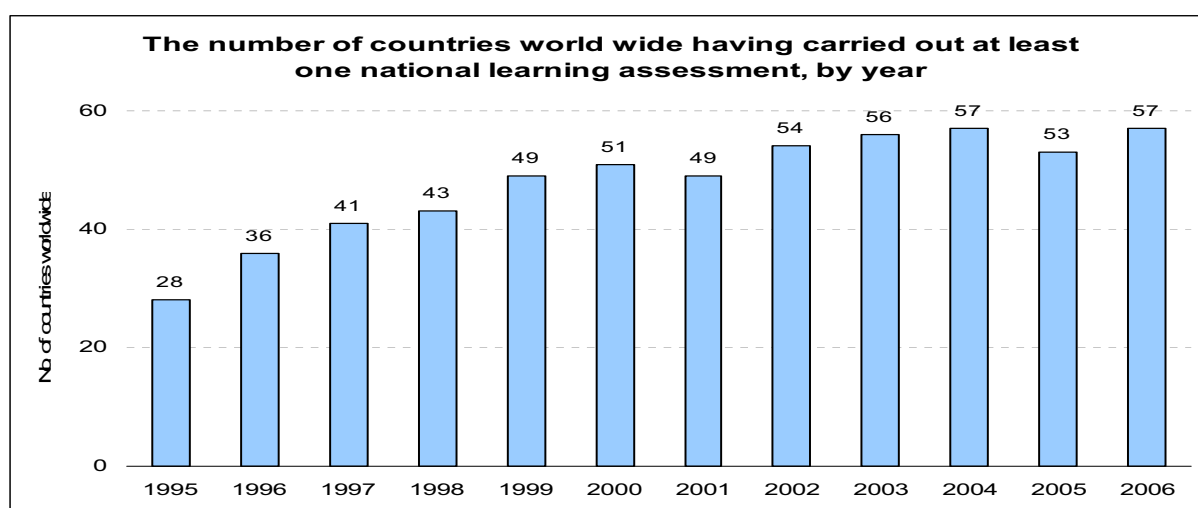
In the present study, all information on national assessments was compiled from four sources. First, government, international agency and assessment project websites served as the primary source for finding hitherto unlisted and less well known national assessment programmes. Second, government officials and in-country educational assessment experts were identified and asked to verify information found on the Internet and to contribute new information on their countries' national assessments. Third, reports and other publications offered data and confirmation about national learning assessments. Fourth, several studies were commissioned by the GMR which provided detailed information on national assessments in Senegal, Hungary, Morocco and most of Central and South America.

5. Trends and commonalities in national learning assessments

The Annex entitled 'National learning assessments by region and country' in the 2008 GMR (pp. 208-220) provides an up-to-date worldwide listing of national learning assessments that have been carried out since the mid-1990s. This section analyses the information in the Annex in order to identify trends and commonalities in the characteristics of national assessments. The following points summarize the major patterns evident in the Annex:

- National learning assessments (NLA) have become a common feature of national education systems around the world. The total number of countries carrying out at least one NLA has risen steadily over time: from 65 countries in the pre-Dakar period (1995-1999) to 111 in the post-Dakar period (2000-2006).
- Another way of representing this increase can be seen in Table 1 which looks at the number of countries having carried out at least one NLA *in each year* since 1995. This number has increased from 28 countries in 1995 to 57 countries in 2006.

Table 1: Number of countries carrying out national learning assessments, by year, 1995-2006

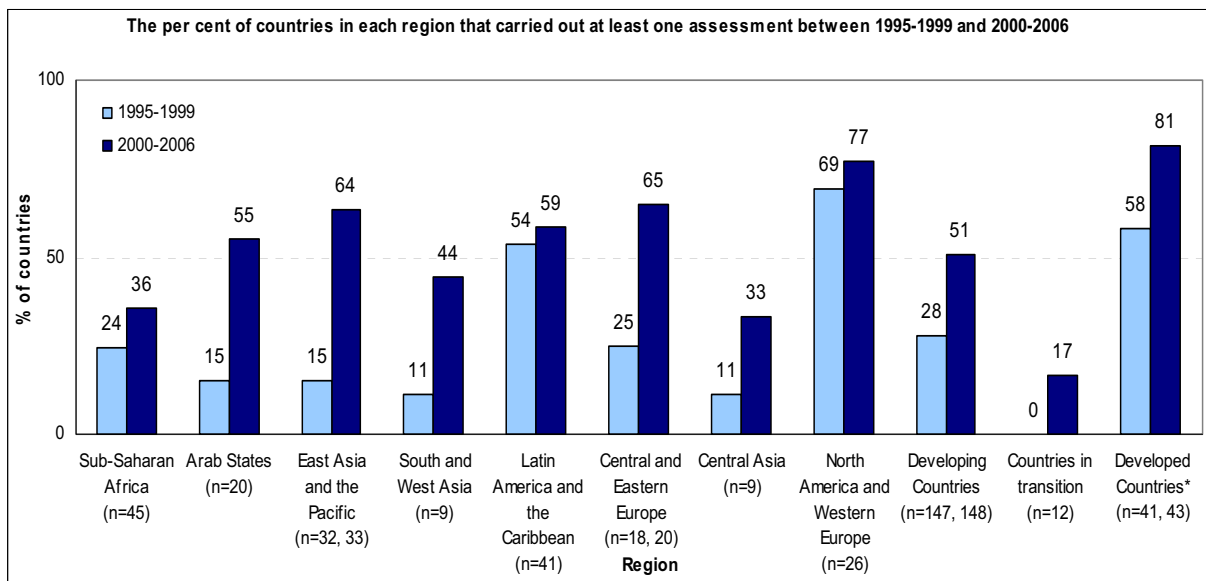


- The prevalence of countries that have carried out at least one national assessment varies between regions and development status (Table 2). Between 2000 and 2006, the North America and Western Europe region had the highest percentage of countries that carried out learning assessments (77%). The prevalence of NLAs was also relatively strong in Central and Eastern Europe (65%), East Asia and the Pacific (64%) Latin American and the

Caribbean (59%) and the Arab States (55%), with more than half of the countries in each region having experience with national assessments.

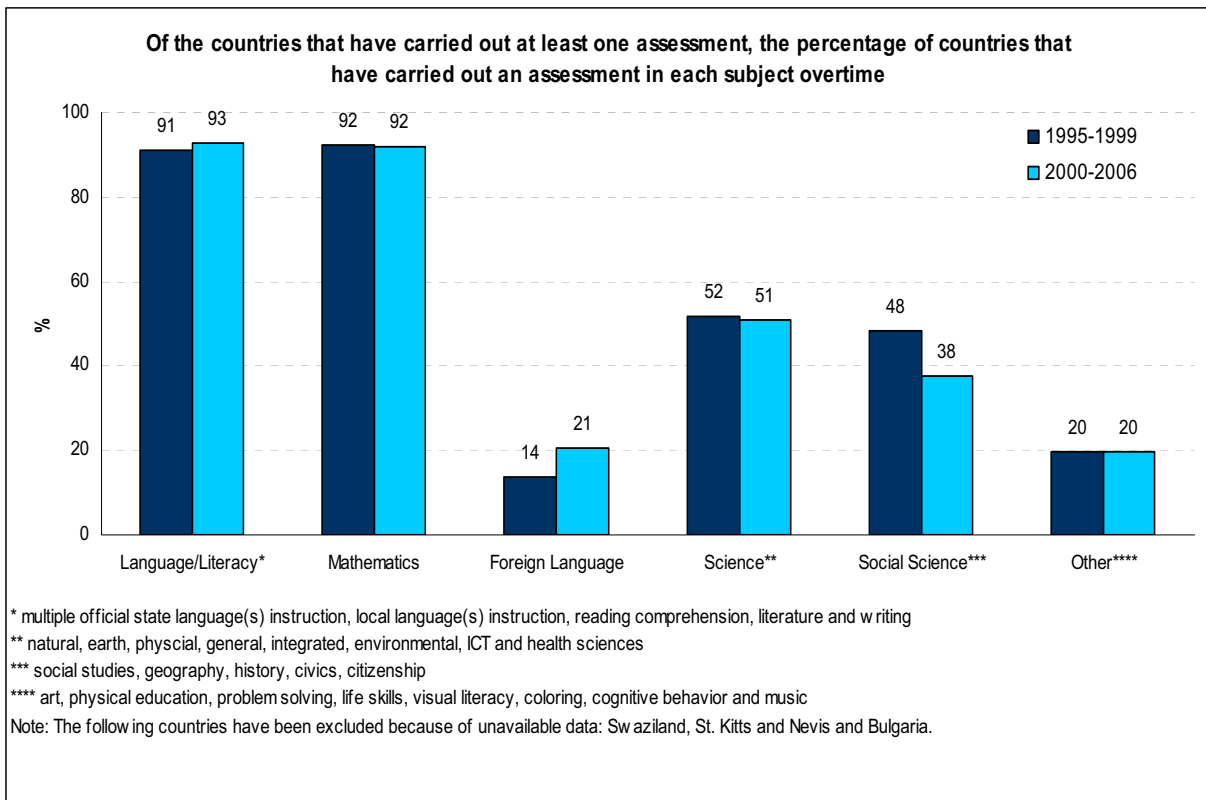
- Economically developed countries were more likely to carry out NLAs (81%) than either developing countries (51%) or transition countries (17%).
- The prevalence of NLAs has increased in every region between the pre- and post- Dakar periods. Notable increases are observed in East Asia and the Pacific (from 11% to 64% of countries in the region), the Arab States (from 15% to 55%), Central and Eastern Europe (from 25% to 65%) and South and West Asia (from 11% to 44%).

Table 2: The percentage of countries carrying out at least one NLA in 1995-1999 and in 2000-2006, by region and development status



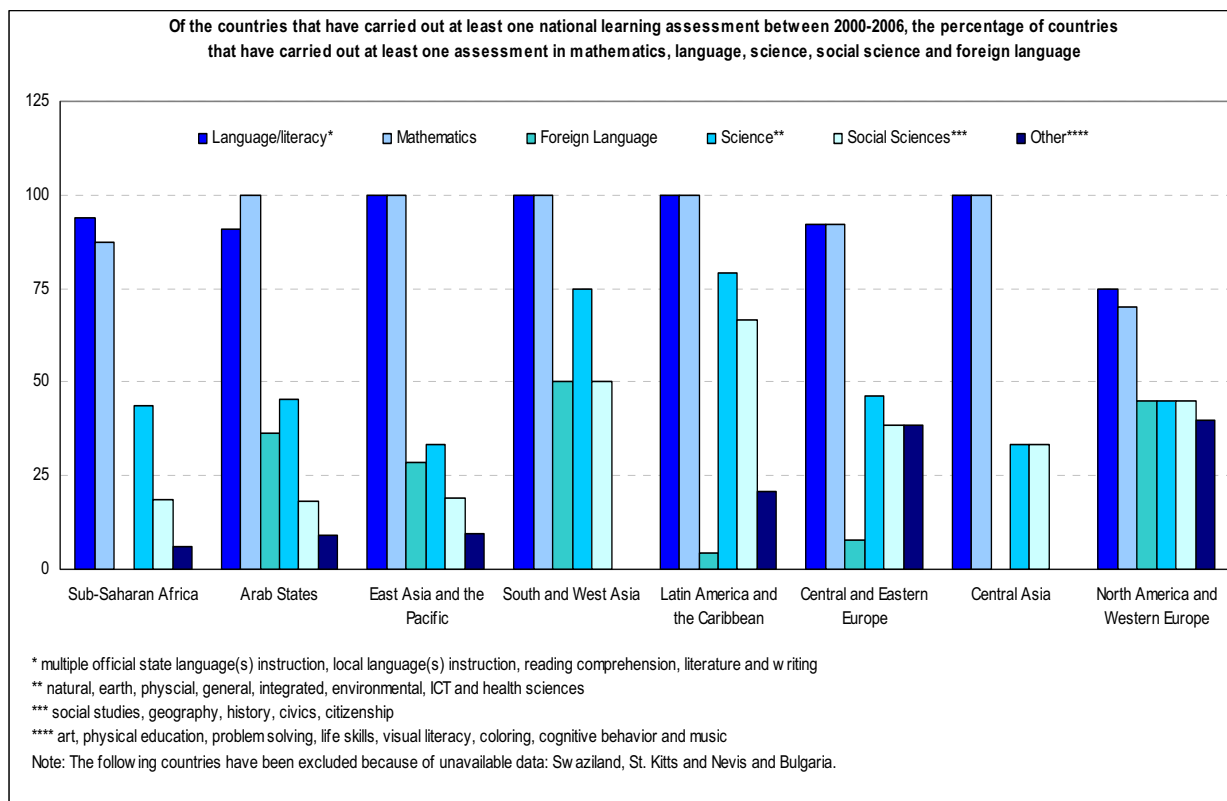
- NLAs are predominantly curriculum-based and subject-oriented assessments. Broken down into five major subject categories (i.e., mathematics, language, science, social science and foreign language), the evidence shows that mathematics (93%) and language (92%) are by far the predominant subjects evaluated in NLAs (Table 3). This not only reflects the strong emphasis on mathematics and language in national curricula worldwide, but also the centrality of these subjects in international assessments and educational discourse. Around half of the countries in the world assess learning outcomes in science; almost two-fifths (38%) assess learning in the social sciences; 21% in foreign languages and 20% in all other subjects including art, physical education, problem solving, life skills, visual literacy, colouring, cognitive behaviour and music.
- In general, there has been little change over time in the prevalence of assessed subjects with the exception of foreign languages, which have gained prominence (from 14% to 21%) and the social sciences, which have lost prominence (from 47% to 38%). The rise of foreign language in NLAs indicates an increased interest in whether students are prepared for international labour markets and to the presumed demands of globalization on national economies.

Table 3: Percentage of countries which have carried out an assessment in specific subject areas



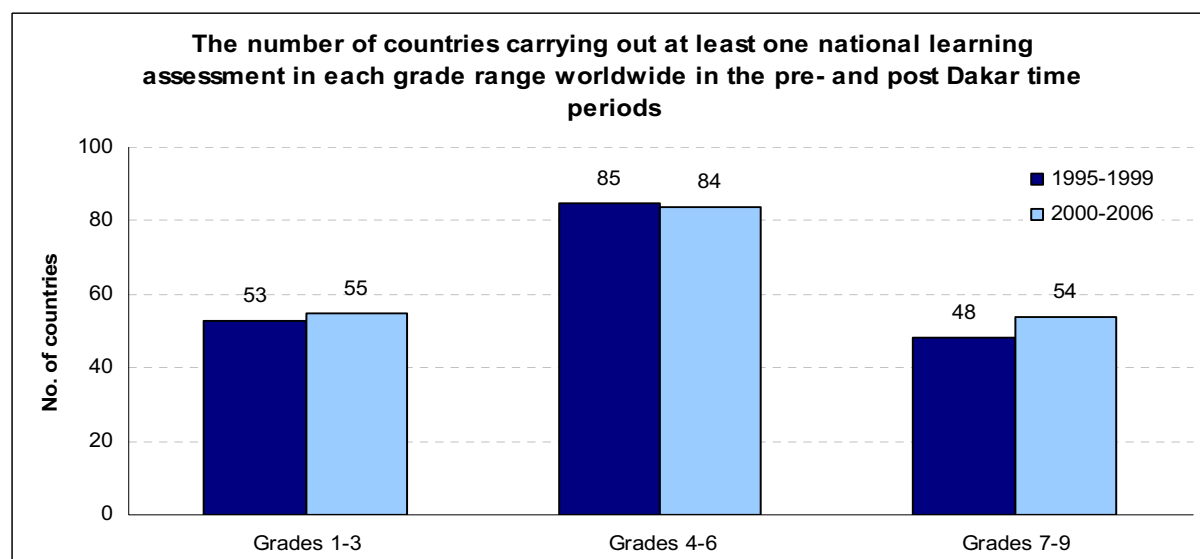
- The focus on different subject areas varies by region (Table 4). For example, the emphasis on science in NLAs is strongest in Latin America and the Caribbean, South and West Asia and East Asia and the Pacific. Assessments of social science subjects (e.g., social studies, geography, history, civics and/or citizenship) are found in every region but are less common than NLAs in science, language and mathematics, except in Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where the two are almost equally emphasized.
- Assessments of foreign languages are emerging as a new focus in NLAs: countries in four of the six regions have carried out assessments in foreign languages. Interest in foreign language assessment is especially pronounced in countries in North America and Western Europe, South and West Asia and, to a lesser extent, in the Arab States and East Asia and the Pacific.

Table 4: Percentage of countries which have carried out an assessment in specific subject areas, by region



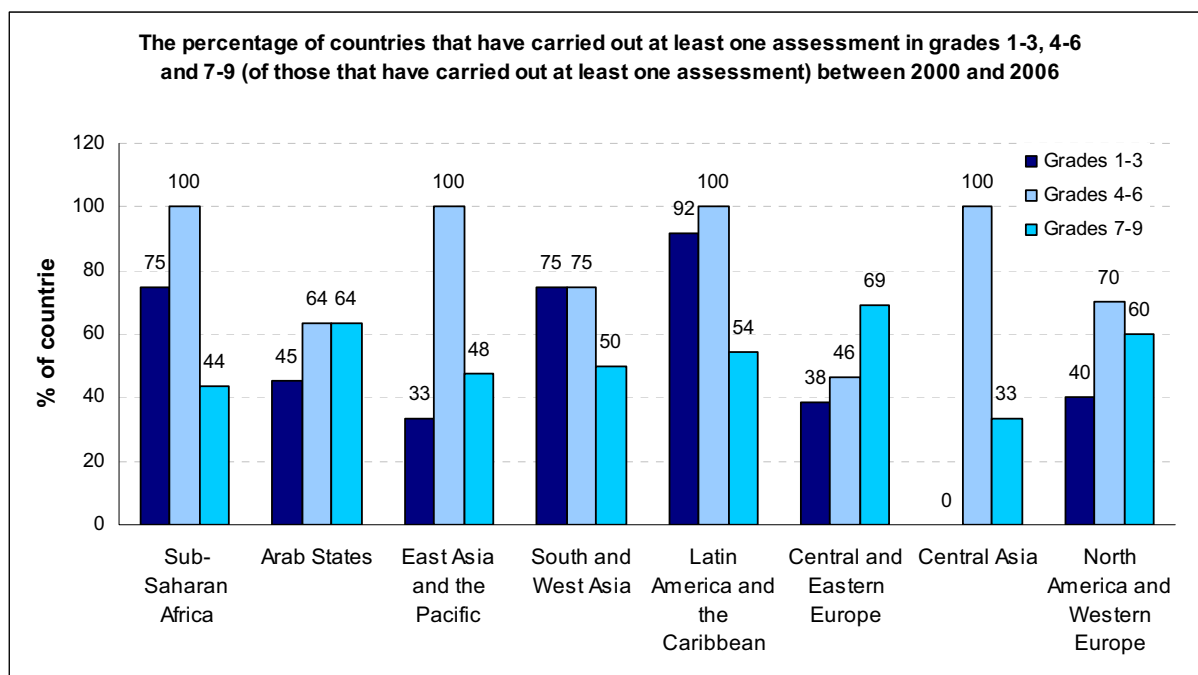
- NLAs tend to focus more on grades 4-6 than grades 1-3 or 7-9 (Table 5). Between 2000 and 2006, for example, 84 countries conducted at least one assessment of learning outcomes in grades 4-6; 55 countries did so in grades 1-3, and 54 countries in grades 7-9. These figures have changed little since the 1995-1999 period, although there seems to be a slight increase of NLAs at the lower secondary level.

Table 5: The number of countries that have carried out at least one NLA, by grade level and period



- The target age of national learning assessments varies, to some extent, across regions (Table 6). NLAs in the primary grades (1-6) are more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and South and West Asia. NLAs in the upper primary (4-6) and lower secondary (7-9) grades are more prevalent in Arab States, East Asia and the Pacific, North America and Western Europe, Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe.

Table 6: The percentage of countries that have carried out at least one NLA, by grade level and region



- *Fragile states.* While half of all developing countries conducted NLAs between 2000 and 2006 period, only 15 of the 35 countries (or 43%) that the OECD categorizes as fragile states did so; nearly half of them are in East Asia and the Pacific.

6. National learning assessments specify the scale of the quality challenge

In many countries, national learning assessments underscore the less-than-satisfactory learning outcomes of primary and secondary students. Despite differences in assessment methods and scales, sample designs and methodological rigor, the assessments almost uniformly point to pockets of low achievement and the need for authorities to find ways to improve student knowledge and competences. Consider the following cases:

- Since 1999 Uganda has carried out 5 assessments to determine the overall achievement levels in grades 3 and 6 in English literacy and numeracy. While less than half of grade 3 and 6 pupils reached the defined competence levels in English literacy, such levels have been improving over time. By contrast, achievement levels in numeracy have fluctuated or declined (Table 7). A recent government report (2006) accounted for these findings by noting: a) the impact of government policies to increase the supply and use of English textbooks; and b) the need for better trained mathematics teachers.

Table 7: Percentage of grade 3 and 6 Ugandan pupils reaching the defined competency levels, by subject and year

Grade	Subject	1999	2003	2004	2005	2006
3	English literacy	18	34	-	38	46
	Numeracy	39	43	-	41	43
6	English literacy	13	20	28	30	34
	Numeracy	42	21	38	33	31

Source: Uganda National Examinations Board (October 2006) *The Achievements of Primary School Pupils in Uganda in English Literacy and Numeracy*. Kampala: Uganda.

- In Thailand the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology carried out a nationwide assessment in 2005 of students in grades 3, 6 and 9 in 891 schools. Although no specific target goal was defined, student achievements (Table 8) were considered ‘unsatisfactory.’

Table 8: Average percent scores in science and mathematics in 2005 national assessment in Thailand

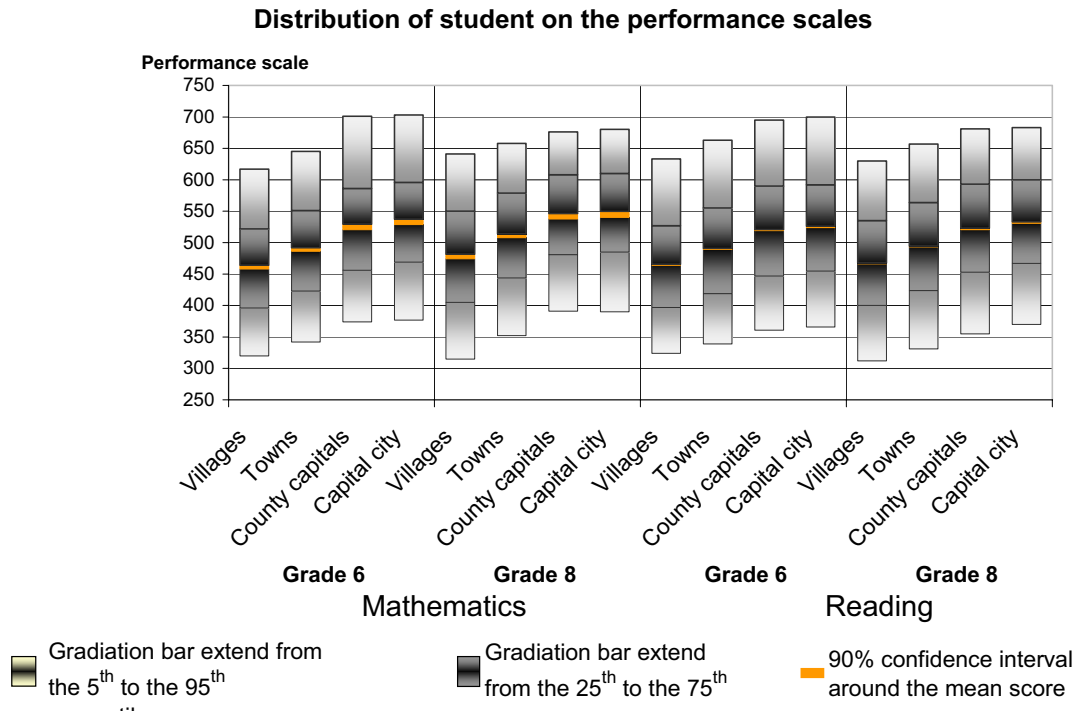
	Science	Mathematics
Grade 3	41.6	42.1
Grade 6	40.3	38.3
Grade 9	32.3	29.2

Source: Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology (2006) *Students’ achievements (Learning outcomes) in Thailand*, Bangkok: Thailand.

- In 2006 Morocco’s Ministry of Education assessed grade 6 students’ achievements in Arabic, French, mathematics and science, based on a sample of 7 ‘strong performing’ urban schools and 96 schools targeted for project intervention. The national assessment found that overall performance was “weak” based the percentage of pupils attaining pre-determined ‘minimum’ or ‘mastery’ competence levels. In Arabic, French and mathematics less than half of students achieved the minimum level: 36% in Arabic, 18% in French and 43% in mathematics; in science, where performance was strongest, 65% of students achieved the minimum level of competence. The respective achievements at the higher mastery level were: Arabic (7%), French (1%), mathematics (11%) and science (20%).
- In 2004-5 Haiti’s Ministry of Education assessed student knowledge in mathematics, French and Creole in grades 1, 3 and 5 in order to establish baseline levels before the implementation of the national school improvement plan. The Ministry’s report characterized grade 5 students’ overall achievement as “weak” with only 44% of students meeting expectations. Grade 5 student scores in mathematics were considered extremely weak and in Creole, “not too bad.” The report also noted that girls scored at higher levels than boys at all areas, public school students scored higher than private school students and students repeating the year scored lower than new students (Desse 2005).

- Hungary, which participated in over 16 international assessments in recent decades, began regularly assessing student achievements in grades 4 and 8 in 1986. In 2001 Hungary implemented a new national assessment of basic competences in reading comprehension and mathematics. Table 9 reports results from the 2006 assessment in grades 6 and 8 and illustrates the distribution of student scores by competence and residence.

Table 9: Select results from Hungary’s 2006 national learning assessment



Source: Balazsi (2007)

7. Are student learning outcomes improving?

With certain caveats⁷ it is possible to assess changes over time in student achievements with information from national learning assessments. Table 10 reports the percentage change in mean achievement, mainly in language and mathematics, between earlier and most recent assessments in 15 countries. In El Salvador, Belize, Colombia, Mexico, South Africa, Senegal and Ethiopia, for example, the over time trends in average achievement are generally upwards, with some fluctuation by subject area. In Peru, Chile and Brazil, mean achievement levels are relatively stable. In Honduras, Niger, Morocco and Thailand the trends are mixed (typically by grade level) and in Costa Rica a slight negative trend is observed.

⁷ Over time comparability of test scores may be reduced due to changes in the composition of student cohorts, sampling designs, test instruments and other factors.

Table 10: Over time changes in learning outcomes based on national assessments, various years

	Grade	Initial year	Most recent year	Subject	Change in achievement level since initial year		
					Increase (more than 5%)	Little or no change (<5%)	Decrease (more than 5%)
					(%)		
Sub-Saharan Africa							
				Basic Reading		1	
Ethiopia	4	2000	2004	Env. Science	8		
				Mathematics	7		
				English		-3	
	1	2000	2005	French	20		
				Mathematics			-13
Niger	3	2000	2005	French	18		
				Mathematics	16		
	6	2000	2005	French			-7
				Mathematics			-28
Senegal	3	1996	2002	French	15		
				Mathematics	26		
South Africa	3	2000	2003	Literacy	7		
				Numeracy	44		
Arab States							
	4	1995	2001	Mathematics			-30
				Arabic			-55
Morocco				French	23		
	6	2001	2006	Mathematics	11		
				Arabic	44		
East Asia and the Pacific							
	3	2003	2005	Science		0	
				Mathematics			-7
Thailand				Thai Lang.			-19
	6	2001	2004	Mathematics			-6
				English			-25
	6	2003	2005	Science		-1	
Latin America and the Caribbean							
				Language	10		
Belize	6	2000	2004	Mathematics	30		
				Science	36		
Brazil	4	1999	2005	Language		1	
				Mathematics		1	
Chile	4	2002	2005	Language		-2	
				Mathematics		0	
Colombia	5	2003	2005	Language		3	
				Mathematics	9		
Costa Rica	6	1999	2000	Language		-3	
				Mathematics			-13
El Salvador	6	2003	2005	Language	24		
				Mathematics	15		
Honduras	6	1997	2004	Language			-38
				Mathematics	60		
Mexico	6	2000	2005	Language	5		
				Mathematics		4	
Peru	6	1998	2004	Language		-2	
				Mathematics		2	

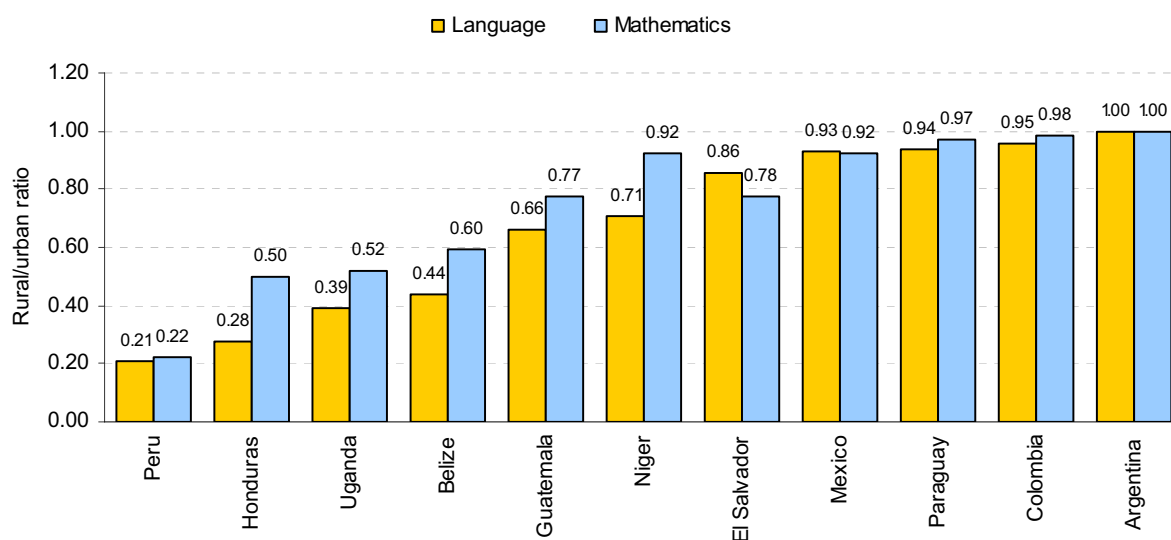
Note: The actual achievement levels compared in each country over time are based on different scales. In Peru, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Belize, Mexico, South Africa, Niger, Ethiopia, Morocco and Thailand the comparison is between mean achievement scores. In El Salvador the percentage of students achieving the upper performance level is compared, whereas in Honduras, the comparison is between the percent students performing at ‘acceptable’ level. In Uganda the percentage of pupils rated ‘proficient’ is compared.

Sources: **Belize** (Mason and Longworth, 2005); **Cambodia** (Cambodia Education Sector Support Project National Assessment Component, 2006). **Ethiopia** (National Organization of for Examinations, Addis Ababa, 2001 and 2004); **Haiti** (Desse, 2005). **Hungary** (Balázsi, 2007); **Kuwait** (Hadi and Al_Omar, 2006); **Latin America** (Murillo, 2007); **Morocco** (Hddigui, 2007); **New Zealand** (National Education Monitoring Project, 1996-2005); **Niger** (Fomba 2006; Georges 2000); **Pakistan** (Government of Pakistan Ministry of Education, 2005); **Senegal** (Ngom, 2007); **South Africa** (USAID South Africa, 2006); **Thailand** (Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology, 2005); and **Uganda** (Uganda National Examinations Board, 2006).

8. Comparing urban/rural and gender disparities across national learning assessments

Results from national assessments typically provide evidence on pupil disparities by household residence and gender. Bearing in mind previous caveats, countries can be compared according to the extent of student disparities.⁸ For example, in most countries for which data are available, rural children achieve lower levels of language and mathematics achievement than urban children (Table 11). This pattern obtains in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, the Niger, Peru and Uganda and, to a lesser extent, in Mexico and Paraguay. The exceptions are Argentina (although the assessment only included public schools) and Columbia, in which achievement disparities between rural and urban students are relatively small.

Table 11: Rural/urban disparities in language and mathematics achievement in grade 5 or 6 based on national learning assessments, various years

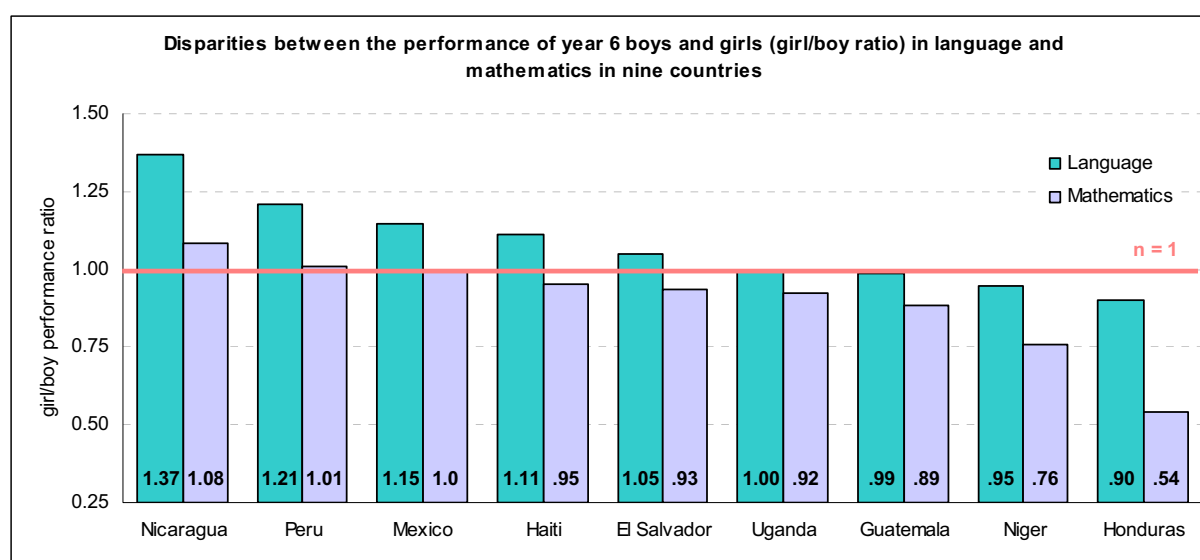


Sources: see Table 10

⁸ Given diverse country definitions and experiences, and differences in the scientific rigor of national assessments, caution is needed when comparing student achievements across countries. To maximize comparability within-country disparities have been transformed into ratios (girls/boys achievement; rural/urban achievement).

Various international and regional assessments have shown that girls often outperform boys in language (Ma 2007). This pattern also obtains in most, but not all, national assessments for grade 6 (Table 12). In mathematics achievement, gender parity is found in several countries (Nicaragua, Peru, Mexico), but the stronger pattern is where boys outperform girls as in Haiti, El Salvador, Uganda, Guatemala, Niger, Honduras.

Table 12: Gender disparities in language and mathematics achievement in grade 6 based on national learning assessments



Sources: see Table 10

Previous Global Monitoring Reports have noted that rural-urban disparities in educational access, participation and completion rates and in adult literacy are often greater than gender disparities. Analyses of student achievement levels based on national assessments (such as the above) further confirms that rural/urban disparities tend to be more salient than gender disparities.

9. Conclusion

National learning assessments, which have largely been overlooked in discussions of education quality, can be extremely useful in two capacities. First, they can provide useful information to education policymakers on learning outcomes in national education systems, which reflect national curricular emphases and priorities. Second, given that monitoring and evaluation frameworks are an essential component of educational quality, national learning assessments can act as an important indicator of such quality and, similarly, as a stepping stone to improve accountability and promote reform. International agencies and non-governmental organizations should give greater credence to national learning assessments for addressing quality issues, even if such assessments provide a weak basis for comparing outcomes across countries. International agencies should assist countries to develop the capacity to conduct learning assessments and improve their scientific rigor and validity. By highlighting the spread and importance of national learning assessments, this paper calls on education stakeholders to encourage more research, policy analysis and exchanges on the value of such assessments.

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